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Critical Reading Techniques in Elementary School.

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The following levels of reading are defined: (1) decoding, (2) literal comprehension, (3) interpretation, and (4) creative thought. The technique of raising open end questions is discussed, and sample questions are provided for each of the above levels. Eleven specific critical reading skills related to level 3 are listed. (CM)

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Jerome S. Brunner, in his Process of Education, stated--"Each generation gives new form to the aspirations that shape education in its time." Concern for the quality and intellectual aims of education seems to be the concern of this generation.

Following along this line of thought, at a conference similar to this one, the theme of the meeting was "Reading as an Intellectual Activity." Dr. Ralph C. Preston had this to say about reading:

"Children should be given to understand that reading is a tool for opening up the world of ideas and that point should be continued to be

stressed throughout their formal education. The real miracle of reading lies less in the process than what can be accomplished through it in advancing knowledge, discrimination, love of nature and of the arts, spiritual sensitivity and reflection." In this broad definition of reading, Dr. Preston continued, "literacy is of value only if it stirs the intellect and forces the reader to re-examine and improve his thinking and his life in the light of it."

At this point certain questions can be raised, such as:

How can an elementary school teacher accomplish the aim of teaching children to read in the manner described by Dr. Preston?

Are there specific techniques for developing the skills of critical and creative reading?

What are the specific skills, and how do these fit into the reading program?

An understanding of the Levels of Reading is a first step in answering the question, "How can an elementary school teacher accomplish the aim of teaching children the power of reading?" David Russell presented the Levels of Reading as follows.

Four Levels of Reading

First level

This level is concerned with the association of printed words with their sounds. This decoding aspect of the reading process involves the association of the phoneme-grapheme relationship, or sound-letter relationship. This early decoding aspect of reading leads to the study of word analysis skills and the many skills of word recognition. At this level, the emphasis is simply on decoding without much attention to meaning. This stage has been called "barking at words."

Second level

This level is concerned with literal comprehension, the lowest level on the ladder of comprehension skills. Some of the skills at this level involve understanding the main idea of a paragraph, story or poem. Other skills involve noting details and finding relevant details to answer specific questions. At this level, the reader understands the facts and learns to follow specific directions.

Third level

This level refers to the skills of critical comprehension. At this level, interpretation of what is read becomes the important factor. The reader goes beyond the literal comprehension of the facts or main idea to reading between the lines. The reader may draw some conclusions, or may generalize and develop inferences on the basis of what is read. Additional skills at this level require the reader to begin to evaluate and analyze the reading passage by distinguishing between fact and opinion, to judge the accuracy of the source of information, and to sense the author's viewpoint and purpose.

Fourth level

This appreciative or depth level enables the reader to go beyond the thoughtful analysis of critical review to a more stirring experience. The "shock of recognition" can be felt by the reader as he recognizes a new or an important idea in the actions, characters, or values described. The development of fresh insights is possible as the feelings and ideas expressed by the author are related to the personal experience of the reader. It is at this level that the reader could "improve his thinking and his life in the light" of his reading. It is important to realize that reading is NOT A PASSIVE ACTIVITY. Comprehension as defined by Webster's Third International Dictionary describes comprehension as:

1. the power to act
2. the process of grasping with the mind
3. the power of the mind to perceive ideas
4. to act upon the significance of ideas

Techniques for Developing Critical Reading

In answering the second question which concerns the techniques in developing critical reading skills, a close look at the "art of questioning" is essential. By asking open-end questions, the teacher can train her students to be active participants in the reading situation. The type of question asked by the teacher determines the response given by the student. For example, to have a discussion about the facts or details of a reading selection, such questions as -- "What?" "When?" "Where?" and "Who?" will elicit factual responses. However, if ideas, concepts, and relationships are up for discussion, then questions such as "How?" "Why?" "In what way?" and "For what reasons?" will steer the discussion into the direction of critical thinking. Additional questions such as "To what extent?" "Under what circumstances?" "What do you mean?" "How do you know?" "What difference does it make?" will stimulate the student to use the technique of inquiry as a tool which leads to the formation of judgments.

Through questions, the teacher can aid the child in the development of his curiosity and imagination. Questions that begin with "What if?" or "What would you have done in a similar situation?" will stimulate his imagination. Dr. Mary Austin describes the development of imagination this way: "Teachers should help children to read in technicolor and with sound effects," thereby bringing their mental images sharply into focus.

Specific Skills of Critical Reading

Some critical reading skills are involved in the following list and relate to level three in the Levels of Reading.

1. Draw conculsions
2. Predict Outcomes
3. Draw inferences
4. Recognizing cause and effect
5. Making comparisons
6. Distinguishing between
   - Fact and fancy
   - Relevant and irrelevant information
   - Similarities and differences
7. Judge skill of author in writing
8. Acceptance or rejection of author's facts
9. Understanding of need to suspend judgment until more information is known
10. Willingness to accept the ideas of the author if he is an expert
11. Ability to judge the bias of the author

Conclusion

Although critical reading skills represent but one aspect of reading, the following poem, taken from Elementary English, sums up the real purposes for teaching children to read.

To Give a Child a Book

To give a child a book is suddenly
To move a mountain from before his eyes
And show a world he never knew to be.

Then he will find new stars in his old skies,
Roads going on which he had thought to end,
Seas, and new continents about to rise.

To give a child a book is like a friend
Opening, for the first time, a secret door
Which opens into others, without end;
And he goes forth, still hungering for more.

The poem quoted above sums up what Dr. Preston meant when he said that "reading is a tool for opening up the WORLD OF IDEAS."